THE STRANGE FOOT-PRINT.

A DETECTIVE STORY.

By Malcolm Bell, Author of "His Fatal Success," "Roanoke of Roanoke Hall," etc.

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CHAPTER XVII.

THE HAT WITH BLUE FEATHERS.

Having arranged with Mary to accompany her on her journey up to London next morning, Mr. Padger betook himself to the pier where he hoped to meet the old sailor who rowed the guard boat, and to hear whether the man in the blue bathing dress or the woman who had screamed had appeared again upon the scene.

He was not disappointed, for a few minutes after his arrival he saw the old man approaching with altogether extraordinary alacrity.

"I've been a-lookin' for you guv'nor," he exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, as soon as he was sufficiently near. "I've seed 'er agin."

"Where?" said Mr. Padger.

"On the beach this blessed mornin', a bein' photygraphed."

"The woman who screamed out that day?"

"The very same, identical."

"Was she alone?"

"No, there was a gent along side of 'er."

"Was it the man who had pockets in his breeches?"

"Couldn't say, not knowing of 'im out of his bathing suit."

"What was he like?"

But the old salt's powers of observation were extremely limited, and he was quite incapable of giving any recognizable description of the man; nor was he more successful in his efforts to recall the appearance of the woman, his prevailing impression not advancing beyond the fact that "she wer a smart little craft, and carried blue feathers at her main truck," by which Mr. Padger not unjustifiably concluded that he meant "in her hat."

"Look here," he said, after vainly endeavoring to stimulate the old man's memory, "Can you show me the man who was taking the photograph this morning?"

"Lor' bless'ee, yes, sir," replied the man. "It was Jim Garron, and I knows him a'most as well as if 'e were my own brother."

The photographer was easily found, being still at his usual post on the sands, and when he had disposed of a family group whom he was engaged in rendering immortal, the old sailor endeavored to explain to him what was required of him. It was some time before he could understand the nautically flavored metaphors of the old salt's description, but when at length he realized his meaning he declared at once that he recollected her perfectly.

"And wery pretty she was too, with 'er blue 'at and feathers."

But though he was decidedly more intelligent than the sailor, he was completely devoid of the faculty of painting a portrait in words, and was unable to advance beyond the merest generalities, while he could not give any account of the personal appearance of the man.

"Bein'," as he owned to Mr. Padger with an airy wink, "more occypied in spottin' the points of the little darling."

"Stop a minit," he exclaimed suddenly. "I've got a pictur of 'em 'ere. The gent moved in the fust I took and spiled the plate, and then wouldn' take it, so I kep it for myself."

He half disappeared for a moment in the little box which formed his portable dark room, and reappeared with a number of negatives, which he proceeded to examine.

"There," he said at length, "that's the little beauty. That's the one you mean, ain't it?"

The old sailor took it, and having with some difficulty placed it at such an angle as enabled him to see it, exclaimed:

"That's 'er—that's the wery one, and the livin' himage of 'er too. Jim, I allus told your father as you'd be a great hartis."

"Let me see," said Mr. Padger, but when he had it in his hand he hesitated for a moment before looking at it. Would he find in that little square of stained glass a further confirmation of his worst fears, the face of Gertrude Ennis, or was this merely a wild goose chase he was engaged upon? His first apprehension proved to be unfounded for it was not Miss Ennis or the least like her. It was a pretty, rather vulgar looking woman, with a queer piquant little face. The man, as the photographer had remarked, had unfortunately moved, and his features were represented by a shapeless, unrecognizable blur.

"Will you let me have this?" he asked when he had concluded his examination.

"Well," said the photographer doubtfully, "it ain't the custom in the profession to sell the pictures of parties to other parties, leastwise without the other parties' consent, and I 'had some thoughts of keepin' the little daisy for myself."

"Oh, never mind then," said Mr. Padger, indifferently. After all what did it matter. He knew too much of his business to reject all evidence that did not conduce to the confirmation of his own beliefs, but the probability was that the coincidence of the woman's screaming and the man's diving was merely a coincidence and nothing more.

"Tell yer wot," said the man, as Mr. Padger moved away. "You shall 'ave it for 'arf a crown, with gilt frame, and a 'ook to 'ang it up by."

"All right," said Mr. Padger. The price was exorbitant, but it might perhaps prove useful, and he would not neglect any clew which tended to lead him from the point he dreaded to approach.

"Say, guv'nor," exclaimed the sailor, as Mr. Padger having duly received and pocketed his purchase was making his way homewards; "'ow about that 'arf suvrin?"

"Why, I promised it to you if you showed the woman to me."

"Well, 'ang it all, I done my best, and the best can do no better," grumbled the man.

"Oh, all right," said Mr. Padger irritably, anxious to get rid of him. "There you are."

"Thankee guv'nor," said the man with a tug at his forelock, and he departed, probably to expend this windfall in spirituous liquors, while Mr. Padger turned his steps in the direction of the harbor in prosecution of his search for Rag Barlow.

Contrary to his expectations, this individual, who had previously eluded all inquiries as to his whereabouts, was now easily found. A dirty, tattered, miserable-looking old man, seated on the shattered gunwale of a boat as forlorn in appearance as himself, and employed in splicing together two frayed remnants of rotten rope.

"Ah," said Mr. Padger, glancing down at this wretched object with pity not unmixed with contempt, "You look as if it wouldn't do you any harm to have a drink—and a wash," he added under his breath.

"It wouldn't, sir, that it wouldn't," he cried. "I haven't touched a blessed drop this day."

"Well, go along, then and I'll follow. You know the way, to judge by the looks of you."

He followed him into a dingy, disreputable pothose, and ordered him the glass of beer he asked for.

"Now, my man," he said, as soon as the girl who served him had withdrawn, "you know very well, I suppose, that I'm not standing you that glass for nothing?"

The man looked scared, but, gathering confidence, presumably from his reflection that he need not answer questions unless he liked, he nodded.

"Where were you last week?" asked Mr. Padger.

"Was you a taking the trouble of asking after me?" said the man in return.

"I was. Where were you?"

"Honored, I'm sure. What was you happenin' to want in cultivatin' my distinguished acquaintance?"

"Where were you?" repeated Mr. Padger, returning to the point.

"I was away in the country for change of hair."

"Oh, yes, I daresay. Where?"

"Well, guv'nor, if you must know, you must. Me and the perlece 'ad a little difference as to the proprietorship of a piece of sail cloth, and as the justices is allus down upon me, I accepted a kind invitatien to stay with the county for a week. If you'd a looked in the paper you'd found out. Lor' bless you, guv'nor, I'm like royalty, nobility and gentry. When I changes my address the fact is dooly reported in the papers."

"Ah," continued Mr. Padger, "where did you get this?" and he laid the watch upon the table. The man turned pale and gasped with consternation.

"I didn't steal it. S'elp me Gaud, I didn't steal it," he said as soon as he could speak.

"Well, where did you get it?"

"I'll tell you the truth, guv'nor, 'pon my honor, I will."

"You had better, my man," said Mr. Padger.

"The day of that there murder, I went down along with the other gentry to 'ave a look at the place where it 'appened. Now, owin' to infant 'abits and hearly eddication, I 'ad one advantage over the rest of the nobility, cos' yer see they weared boots and I 'adn't none. Consekently, paddlin' about in the water outside I felt somethink underfoot. I waited till the water moved hoff and then I sat down casual like and grope hit hup and supped it into my pocket, without nobody a noticin' hanythink. D'yer see?"

"Yes," said Mr. Padger, "I see, go on."

"When I got 'ome to my famerly manshun I takes it hout and sez, sez I: 'Blame me if it haint a watch.' I was rayther cumfoozelumd wot to do with it, so I takes it to a friend o' mine with whom I've done bizniss occasional, and he gave me five bob for it, and no questions asked."

"The hoary headed old reprobate," muttered Mr. Padger to himself at this revelation.

"And that, guv'nor, is the truth, the 'ole truth, and nothink but the truth, as the perliceman says afore he starts a perjurin' of himself."

"But didn't you hear that the police were enquiring for it?"

"Well, guv'nor, I 'aint much of a 'and at readin' the papers, but maybe I did 'ear somethink about it."

"Then why didn't you go and give them what information you could?"

"Well, yer see, me and the perlice, we don't 'it it hoff, and I wasn't sure 'ow they might take my hinterference. The pervisions at this 'ere county hotel don't suit my delicate happetite, and I knowed they was allus glad of a chanst again me, so I 'eld my tongue."

"I see," said Mr. Padger. "And you didn't tell the—the friend to whom you sold it that people were asking for it?"

"Not me," said Barlow with a chuckle of cunning. "'E knows 'ow to look out for hisself, he does."

"Mr. Padger felt convinced that the man had told him the truth so far, and concluded that he might safely trust to his reply to the important question he wished to ask, the more so as its moment would not impress him.

"Now, Barlow," he said, "I'll give you a shilling if you tell me the truth."

"I 'ave, guvnor, s'elf me, I 'ave," protested the man.

"Did you move the hands?"

"Move the 'ands?" asked Barlow with an air of bewilderment.

"Yes. Turn them around. Alter them in any way?"

"Could I?" he asked, with the manner of a man who has been wrongfully deprived of a lawful pleasure, and in a tone of such complete simplicity that it was impossible to doubt its perfect genuineness.

"That will do," said Mr. Padger, flinging the shilling on to the table, and cutting short the old creature's extravagant protestations of gratitude by turning on his heel and walking out of the room, with its sickly atmosphere of bad spirits and stale tobacco.

"I don't know that it would go for much in a court of law, but it's good enough for me," he said to himself as soon as he had got into the fresh outer air.

When he reached home he carefully opened the watch without disturbing the hands. It was an old one, and the covers no longer fitted with their former tightness. The steel wheels were clogged with rust, and a deal of extremely fine sand had sifted in among the other parts.

After some minutes' consideration, he arose and filling a tumbler with water from a jug on the side table, deliberately immersed the watch in it.

At the end of five minutes he took it out again, and on reopening it discovered, as he hoped and expected, that the water had penetrated and completely filed it.

"That's good enough," he said half aloud. "Miss Ennis didn't do it at all events."

The reasons on which he founded this conclusion were simple and indisputable. Miss Ennis was in the public garden at 12:45 and must, consequently, have left the machine not later than half past, as she said. The watch had stopped at 1:05 and could not therefore, as his practical experiment showed, have fallen or been thrown into the water sooner than five minutes to 1 at the latest. The obvious inference was that Miss Ennis had undoubtedly left the machine before the murder was committed.

This was in itself a considerable relief to Mr. Padger, but he felt that it was not an entirely satisfactory result. That Miss Ennis did not actually strike the cowardly blow with her own hands was no proof that she was not cognizant of it, an accomplice before or after the fact. That a man might have made his way into the machine was no evidence that such a thing had taken place, and even if that were clearly shown it was only too likely to appear at the same time that she had been aware of the fact. Who the man had been was yet to be discovered, and Mr. Padger greatly feared that it lay between two men, with each of whom Miss Ennis had relations of some kind. Of these two, Mr. Ennis and Dr. Benton, Mr. Padger's suspicions were mainly directed to the latter.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HAND OF CHANCE.

Although he was avowedly waiting to hear from the Cape before bestowing any more attention upon the bathing machine mystery, Mr. Padger, as a matter of fact, thought incessantly about the affair. He was much exercised about Dr. Benton's sudden flight from Westcliffe followed so closely on their interview at Monplaisir, and at the departure of the Ennises so nearly at the same time, and so much earlier in the year than it had been their custom to leave. Was it a coincidence, or had it been the result of an arrangement between them? Had Dr. Benton been aware of the interest he had excited, or were his actions merely prompted by some altogether unconnected circumstance? To these questions Mr. Padger had no means of obtaining an answer, nor did he see any method of procuring one.

A month passed while he was occupying his leisure in these useless speculations, and he was no nearer a solution at the end of that time than he was at the beginning.

One day at the beginning of September, having a few hours on his hands, he determined to devote them to the cultivation of his favorite accomplishment, and took himself to the neighboring swimming bath which he was in the habit of visiting once or twice a week when time allowed.

He enjoyed his swim immensely and having worked himself into a state of extreme personal satisfaction by beating his own previous record in swimming under water, he was about to leave when, in passing the open door of one of the dressing boxes, he saw impressed upon a dry portion of the boards forming the floor, the mark of that left foot with the great toe missing, which had so long haunted and puzzled him. The box, however, was empty, and the bearer of that distinctive mark, who had hitherto escaped him, had, in all probability, vanished again as completely as before.

"At all events," thought Mr. Padger, trying to draw consolation from the reflection, "I was right in my conjecture. The murderer was a man."

The attendant, to whom Mr. Padger was well known, happened to be close to the entrance at the time, and he made his way in that direction, in order to ascertain if possible whether the man was acquainted with the owner of that foot. At first he could make nothing of him, but when he was informed that he had the great toe missing from his left foot, he declared that he remembered him perfectly, and that he had only left a few minutes before.

"Does he come here often?" asked Mr. Padger hurriedly, anxious to be off in pursuit.

"Oh, yes. He comes pretty frequent," said the man. "You can't possibly mistake him, because he is such a beautiful diver."

"You don't happen to know his name, I suppose?" said Mr. Padger, carelessly toying with a shilling.

"No, I don't," answered the attendant, regretfully.

"Can you tell me what he is like?"

"Well, he is a good-looking, middle-aged man, and to-day he's got on a light gray suit, but I don't recollect much about him except his diving. That was beautiful, sure enough. You ought to have seen him, Mr. Padger, for you're no slouch yourself, though he lays over you."

"If you can find out his name for me by the next time I come you shall have this," said Mr. Padger," pocketing the coin, and he hastened out of the place.

He was only just in time, for as he emerged from the baths he perceived a man in a light gray suit turning the corner at the extreme end of the street.

"That's my man," said Mr. Padger with conviction, "and now I suppose there is nothing to be done but to run for it."

Accordingly he set off at full speed, regardless of the jeers and shouts of the street boys, the cheers of the cabmen and the undisguised amazement of the better dressed class of pedestrians. It was no time to think of appearances, for if he could not reach the corner before the man in the gray suit had disappeared he might lose him, possibly for ever.

Panting and perspiring, he turned the corner at length, and with a rush of exultant joy perceived the unconscious stranger walking rapidly onwards about three hundred yards ahead.

Accommodating his pace to the other man's, so as to gradually overtake him, Mr. Padger followed. Down one street, to the right, down another, to the left, on and on they went for a good half hour, the man in gray in front, and Mr. Padger relentlessly following in his track.

During this long chase he had ample opportunity to consider the matter with more deliberation than he had yet applied to it, and he could not but own that he had proceeded to his conclusions with undue precipitation.

It was certainly not usual for a man to be without the great toe of his left foot, but it was not on the other hand so extraordinary a circumstance as to altogether warrant the inference at which he had somewhat over-hastily jumped. That a man with that identical peculiarity should at the same time happen to be such an extraordinary good diver as to attract the attention of expert like the attendant at the baths, was undoubtedly a point in his favor, but it might, after all, be simply a curious coincidence, and he felt that it would not do to put too much dependence upon his discovery.

"Anyhow," thought Mr. Padger, "it can do no harm to have a look at my friend in the gray suit, if I can manage it without awakening in his mind any suspicion that he is being watched."

At that moment the stranger turned yet another corner, and Mr. Padger saw that his chance had come. The street they were then in ended in the center of one side of a small square, and a hasty glance showed him that the only way out was through a street similarly situated at the opposite side.

The stranger turned to the left; Mr. Padger turned to the right, and as soon as he was concealed from the other's observation by the trees and shrubs in the garden in the middle he started off on a run.

"If it isn't a plant, which I don't think it is, and if he doesn't hang out here, I've got him," said Mr. Padger, as he skimmed as lightly as possible over the ground.

He stopped short before he got to the other end, and pulling himself together and overcoming to the best of his ability all traces of his recent exertions, he strolled at a leisurely pace round the corner of the enclosure. At the same instant the quarry he had been pursuing turned the other, and before he could recover from his astonishment he found himself face to face with Mr. Ennis.

"Mr. Padger, I believe," said he cheerily. "And how are you, Mr. Padger?"

"Very well, thank you, Mr. Ennis," he replied. "I hope you are quite well?"

"Pretty well, thank you, pretty well."

"And Miss Ennis—she is well also I hope?"

"Oh yes, thank you. Quite well. Very well, very well indeed."

While this elaborate exchange of civilities was going on Mr. Padger was watching his man closely, but he failed to detect any symptoms of surprise or embarassment in his manner.

"You have not earned that £100 yet," remarked Mr. Ennis.

"No," replied Mr. Padger, fairly taken aback at this blunt introduction of the subject that he was aiming at.

"No, Mr. Ennis," he repeated, eyeing him firmly, "I haven't—yet, but I mean to before I've done."

"That's right, that's right," said Mr. Ennis, with a laugh that seemed to Mr. Padger rather forced. "I like to see young men persevering."

"I hope you enjoyed your swim," said Mr. Padger, rather affronted at this patronizing treatment of himself.

Mr. Ennis stopped short in his walk, and stared with open eyes.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered at length.

"I said I hoped you enjoyed your swim," said Mr. Padger indifferently.

"My swim," echoed Mr. Ennis. "What do you mean?"

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Padger hastily, wondering whether this display of astonishment was genuine or affected. "I thought I saw you come out of the Westbourne park swimming batq just now."

"I? Oh no, no. You must have been mistaken. I'm too old for that sort of thing. I wonder what my doctor would say, with my gout. No, no. I leave that sort of thing to you younger folks."

Mr. Padger was fairly puzzled. He could not for the life of him determine whether he was hearing the truth, or an admirably acted lie. Mr. Ennis' manner, as far as he could judge, was perfectly easy, natural and unaffected, but he had by this time ample leisure to arm himself at all points against awkward questions.

"Mr. Ennis," said he at last, determined to risk a great deal in order to settle this doubtful point. "Will you answer me one question?"

"Well, Mr. Padger," he replied, cautiously. "That may have to depend to a certain extent what the question may be. If you like to ask it, I will tell you whether I will answer it or not?"

"Why—" said Mr. Padger slowly and solemnly, "why did you say you were going to London on the day of the murder when you meant to remain in Westcliffe all the while?"

If he expected to penetrate the armor of Mr. Ennis' reserve he was not disappointed. He turned towards him quickly, and flushed crimson up to the very roots of his hair.

"Oh, you found that out, did you?" he said after a pause, with a laugh which in spite of himself sounded uncomfortable.

"Of course I did," said Mr. Padger with some asperity. "Will you tell me why you said it?"

Mr. Ennis hesitated awkwardly. Was he doubting the advisability of speaking the truth, or was he struggling to invent a plausible lie?

"Well Mr. Padger," he said at length. "I will tell you the truth."

"Much better," interposed that individual laconically.

"I heard rumors—in fact I had received—an anonymous letter. More idle scandal—to which—no doubt—I should never have paid any attention—about—about—in fact a visitor--to my wife."

"Oh, you had heard of it," said Mr. Padger recalling the awkward manner of the spiteful house maid. "I thought so."

"What, you knew that too?" cried Mr. Ennis.

"I find out most things in time," remarked Mr. Padger confidently.

"Indeed," said Mr. Ennis, turning very pale. "Well, I—I—in fact I made up my mind to watch her that day—pretend to go to town—and—and—in short not to go. When I heard of that poor woman's awful fate—I—was ashamed to confess what I had intended to do—I did not dare to own it, so I kept it to myself."

"Who was this visitor?" asked Mr. Padger, as if perfectly satisfied with this explanation.

"I have no idea who he was," said Mr. Ennis.

"You never saw him then, by any chance?"

"Never, that I know of."

"Well," said Mr. Padger suddenly, "this is my way. Good-bye."

He held out his hand as he spoke. Mr. Ennis seemed slightly surprised, and somewhat disinclined to encourage this familiarity by accepting it, but Mr. Padger could be absolutely impervious to hints or snubs when it suited him, and as he still held his hand extended, Mr. Ennis had no choice but to accept it, or behave with boorish incivility.

"That's a very nice diamond you have there," said Mr. Padger, pointing to a ring which he observed on the hand as he shook it warmly.

"Yes," replied Mr. Ennis haughtily. "It's not a bad stone."

"Brazilian?" queried Mr. Padger.

"No; I got it at the Cape."

It was a lucky thing at that moment for Mr. Padger that many years of constant self-repression had accustomed him to master every outward manifestation of his feelings, for otherwise he must have started or given utterance to some exclamation. As it was, he merely remarked carelessly, as he released the hand which he had raised in order to inspect the jewel more closely:

"Indeed. You know those parts?"

"Yes," said Mr. Ennis briefly, and he moved away as if to put an end to any further questions.

"Indeed," said Mr. Padger, "Well, good morning."

Mr. Padger stood watching the departure of the other man, but before he had time to advance more than a few paces he called after him:

"By the way, Mr. Ennis, since you know the Cape, perhaps you can help me."

"In what?" said Mr. Ennis, turning.

"When you were out there, did you know anything of a woman called Alice Carlyon?"

The effect produced by this simple question was as extraordinary as it was in many ways unexpected. The quiet, almost patronizing smile vanished instantly from Mr. Ennis' lips; a wave of deepest crimson flushed for a moment over his face, and then ebbed, leaving him still paler than before.

"No," he stammered rather than said. "No, I knew nothing of her. Of course," he added awkwardly, "I had heard of her."

[TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.]

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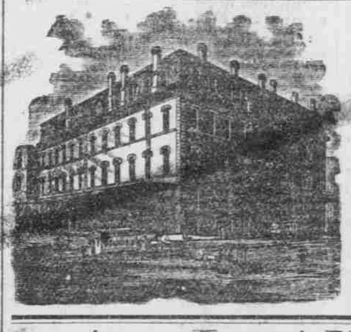

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